

Best Buddies: a pilot project linking Our Lady of Good Counsel School and Ballincollig Community School

Best Buddies is an international programme providing opportunities for one-to-one friendships between people with intellectual disabilities and their non-disabled peers. It was founded by Anthony Kennedy Shriver in the United States in 1989 and is now available worldwide. Participants are matched with people who are close in age and share common interests and hobbies. Best Buddies asks participants to meet twice a month and to contact each other once a week.

Students from Our Lady of Good Counsel (OLGC) Special School in Ballincollig joined with Ballincollig Community School (BCS) transition-year pupils to pilot the ever-growing Best Buddies programme. With the guidance of Ken Kavanagh, Director of Best Buddies Ireland, seven students from Our Lady of Good Counsel School were matched with transition-year students from Ballincollig Community School in autumn 2005. Twenty-four other transition-year students formed a committee to fundraise and support the programme. They held 13 committee meetings to plan events.

Activities enjoyed:

Matched buddies enjoyed a number of activities together, including shopping, going to the cinema, having a meal, bowling and hockey. The fundraisers raised sufficient funds for the year's group activities by holding two events: a red-and-white day at school and an 8 km walk.

Organised group activities:

Sharing a picnic after fundraising walk
2 Bowling nights
Christmas dinner
Football, rounders and barbeque at BCS
Joint music class and refreshments at OLGC school

What the participants said:

Our Lady of Good Counsel students and their parents completed evaluation sheets. Ballincollig Community School students and contact teachers from both schools also completed evaluation sheets.

Students from OLGC School



Deirdre

My Best Buddies are Elaine and Maeve. We went to the movies. We saw Narnia. We had a pizza afterwards. I went to Maeve's house. We played some games. I went shopping with them. I got a text message from Elaine and Maeve. We went out to dinner. We went to Currans (restaurant). All the Best Buddies came. I would like my Buddies to text me more, I love texting.



Ian

Ian met with his Best Buddies when 'bowling/phone calls'. He reported that they ring at night. Ian reported this was 'nice' and that he would like to take part again next year.



Lisa

My Best Buddy is Laura Bracken. She goes to Ballincollig Community School. It is near my school. We go lots of places together. We go to the cinema and we visit our homes. We also text and phone one another. At other times the Best Buddies all go out together. We go bowling and we also go out for meals. I love having Laura as my Best Buddy.

Debbie

Debbie reported she particularly enjoyed 'football, hockey, bowling and dinner'. 'I had chips and a burger'. Debbie would like to take part next year. She would like to go bowling and to the cinema.



Diarmuid

I met my Best Buddies Paul and James at the cinema. My school helped me. We go to the cinema and bowling. We play games. We all went bowling together and we had dinner too. We had chicken and chips. We had great fun. Paul and James are cool and fun to be with. I would really like to go out with them more times. I would really love to do 'Best Buddies' again next year.

Aoife

My Best Buddies are Lorraine and Lisa. They like the same things as me. We all like shopping and hanging out. I went to town with Lorraine twice. I bought a pink top and a red top. Lorraine bought pants with gold glitter. A pink belt came with it. I'm getting the same pants as Lorraine for Rome. I went to the movies with Lisa in Ballincollig. We saw Narnia. I love our bowling nights out because I get to talk with my Best Buddies. We all wear our best clothes. I like going out to dinner with the gang. Last time I had a triple cheese burger with chips. All the Best Buddies came to our class and had a party. We had a sing-song with them. I love my Best Buddies. I'd like them to ring me again.



Alex

Alex enjoyed the group dinner and bowling.

Parents of Buddies from OLGC School

All parents wished their son or daughter would continue the programme next year. Comments included:

... really enjoys separate independent friends and feels grown up around them.

... looks forward to going out with non-family members for a change.

It was most beneficial for ..., the chance to be a teenager/meeting in town, shopping, going to the cinema without her mum or another family member in tow. She really enjoys that.

Interaction with her best buddy has built her confidence.

... loves being involved; he loves going out with his buddy—he looks forward to each meeting with great anticipation.

Parents suggested the programme could be improved by:

- ❖ more texting from transition-year pupils
- ❖ enabling OLGC students to meet with their new buddies with a family member so that initial meetings are less awkward
- ❖ more frequent contact from the transition-year Buddies.

BCS transition-year students

Twenty-three of the 24 student participants responded to the questionnaires. Over half of the students found the group activities the most enjoyable in the programme. Most of the matched buddies favoured the group activities. They reported more excitement and feeling more at ease in the group. One comment illustrated the general feeling of the group:

I preferred the group activities because there was more fun and excitement and we were more at ease with our friends around.

All respondents said they would like the programme to continue next year.

Two of the matched buddies found both activities equally enjoyable.

One preferred the one-to-one contact:

I like the one-to-one contact because you get to know your buddy more.

One-third liked the group meal out best.

One enjoyed most a Chinese meal she had with her buddy.

Challenges reported included difficulties in communicating:

My buddy sometimes just drops the phone and walks away but I know he still likes to get calls.

They were also challenged by trying and failing to make contact with their buddy. They reported

overall the programme was a great success—we always have a laugh.

Transition-year students' suggestions:

Over half of them wanted more organised group activities in the year. Interesting suggestions included:

- ❖ encourage both sets of parents to meet at the beginning of the programme
- ❖ meet with other committees and Buddy pairs in the city for group activities
- ❖ more school visits. Meet for a class such as art or cookery at school
- ❖ encourage OLGC Buddies to text and phone more frequently
- ❖ frequent reminders to maintain regular contact.

Contact teachers

Our Lady of Good Counsel School

It added a new dimension to our children's lives—contact with the ultra stylish and fun children from the local community school

Ballincollig Community School

It was a very positive experience for Fourth Years—they have learned many skills, e.g. bonding, running a committee, making decisions and choices, fun and interacting between both groups.

Overall the Best Buddies programme was met with interest and enthusiasm in its first year at these two schools. Participants helped to identify positive aspects and highlighted areas needing development. The challenge of ongoing motivation to maintain contact and the issue of ease and communication both need to be addressed in the future in order to build on this worthwhile programme in the coming years.

**Deirdre Lovett, Ian Kelleher, Debbie Manning,
Diarmuid O'Leary, Aoife O'Sullivan, Alex Roe
Clare O'Keefe,
PRO, Best Buddies,
Ballincollig Community School.
Yvonne McCarthy,
Brothers of Charity Services, Cork**